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PAROCHIAL MISSION WOMEN.

A PAPER

READ AT

The Church Congress, Manchester,

OCTOBER 15TH, 1863,

BY

VICE-CHANCELLOR SIR WILLIAM PAGE WOOD.

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THE subject which I have undertaken to bring before the consideration of the Meeting has already been introduced to the notice of the Church Congress. A paper was read on the Institution of Parochial Mission Women, by the Rev. Wellington Furse, at the meeting of 1862, which stated the origin, constitution, and aim of the society concisely yet fully, and enforced with an eloquence which I should endeavour in vain to emulate, the arguments in favour of its further development. I hope that the actual work, as well as the origin of the Institution, has become well known by the simple and deeply interesting narrative published by the Hon. Mrs. Talbot, one of the Lady-managers; copies of the second edition of which may be had of Messrs. Hale and Roworth, Cross-street.* It would, indeed, be sufficient to refer to that publication and to Mr. Furse's paper, without further observation on my own part, were it not for the recent date of the undertaking, and the increased confidence in its success which has been derived from the experience

* Rivingtons, Waterloo Place, London.

of another year. It has now acquired a recognised position as an auxiliary in parochial work, by the place assigned to it in the Bishop of London's great scheme for supplying the spiritual wants of the metropolis and its suburbs. Many here present must recollect the appearance of a little work called "The Missing Link," under which quaint title a narrative was given of the ready access obtained to the homes and hearts of the poor, by the employment of women selected from their own rank of life. These agents were called Bible-women, and the history of their work, in stimulating the indolent to exertion, in reclaiming the vicious, in teaching by example the advantages of a clean, well-ordered home, and, yet more, in leading those whom they visited to a longing after better things, to a desire to become acquainted with the Word of Life, could not fail to interest every reader. The chain of Christian brotherhood seemed to have snapped like the electric cable in some of its submerged links. The missing link was to be found and riveted.

It is, however, obvious to all who have a firm faith in the Divine mission of the Church, that the permanence and ultimate success of any scheme for diffusing a knowledge of Christian truth must depend mainly on its being made to harmonise with the agencies already engaged in carrying on the Church's work. It is well if we have been shown a *link* that will bind the rich to their poorest brethren, but the whole chain must be brought home and secured to the firm ground, the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner-stone. This was felt by one who had perused the work. The thoughts that God put into her heart were communicated to the Incumbent of a London district. The seed had fallen in good ground, and bore fruit. In the early part of 1860, four ladies, members of our Church, endeavoured to avail themselves of the agency of Mission-women, by means of a society, of which they became the managers. The society was constituted on the following principles:—

1. That the Mission should be part of and be subordinate to the Parochial System of our Church.

2. That the Mission-woman (being of course a member of the Church of England) should be selected by the Incumbent of the parish from amongst the poor; and that her work should be superintended not only by the Incumbent, but by a lady of education, to be also named by him.

3. That no direct relief in the shape of alms should be given, but that the Mission should be the extension of Christian civilisation (the only true civilisation) among the poor—that they should be instructed and encouraged in habits of Christian love and courtesy, in self-discipline, and self-support.

I will very briefly touch upon each of the above heads.

First, as forming part of the parochial system, a Mission is established only upon the application of the Incumbent. He selects the Mission-woman and the Lady Superintendent. The Mission-woman is not a Scripture reader, nor a teacher of religious doctrines, but through her agency, and that of the Lady Superintendent, the pastor is informed of the spiritual necessities of all who are brought within the sphere of their influence. They are instructed to refer to him alone in all such cases. The arrangement may be terminated by a month's notice on either side, viz., by the Lady-managers of the society, or by the Incumbent; so that the possibility of collision with the Incumbent, or interference with his office, is effectually prevented.

Secondly, the Mission-woman is taken from the ranks of the poor. I cannot here do better than repeat Mr. Furse's citation from Mr. Talbot's work: "She goes among them a living witness that one of themselves may be something better and happier than *they* are."

The object in view would be frustrated if the Mission-woman were raised by the society above her original position. The salary, therefore, is purposely kept very low, from 8s. to 14s. a

week, according to the circumstances of the work, and the time that it requires. She is one whose habits of cleanliness, economy, order, and sincere piety are attainable, through God's blessing, by all of her own class. Of this she is to be the living witness, subduing them to her own nature through the sympathy of affection, not by any exhibition of herself as a model or a teacher. Her work is done quietly and simply, often as a portion of her daily duties. No attempt has been made to define it. She enters one house, and finds its inmates prostrate with fever, in the midst of dirt and squalor. She will clean the room, set things to rights, watch, if necessary, through the night. In another place she encounters drunkenness, and all its miserable consequences; the clothes, the furniture pawned, even down to the bed and bed-clothing. She will take a favourable moment for letting the wretched inmates know with how little self-denial they may be raised from such misery to comfort. To re-kindle the feeling of hope, which becomes all but quenched in the miseries of squalid poverty, is her constant aim. In other cases she will suggest the sending of children, hitherto wholly neglected, to school. In all, she will strive to bring those whom she visits to their pastor, and through him to the great Shepherd of the flock. She brings specially before his notice those little ones whom their Saviour is ever ready to embrace; and the testimony of the clergy as to the increased number of infants brought to them for Holy Baptism, through the agency of the Mission-woman, is uniform and striking.

Those who have had any experience of the poor will know how much more effective such an agency must be than any visits, however kindly meant or kindly conducted, by ladies or gentlemen, or even by the Clergy themselves. With reference to the *social* character of the degraded, the Clergyman must be ignorant of much that is known to the Mission-woman, who has had herself to struggle with poverty. His friendly remonstrances, if extended beyond spiritual matters, are frequently rejected as

interference. I have heard of the poor saying, with regard to the visits of an exemplary clergyman, that it seemed as if the policeman were looking them up. Neither can the clergyman's wife, or any lady, thoroughly master all the besetting temptations of the poor to improvidence and consequent disorder. There is always a risk, also, when the visits of the wealthy are expected or frequent, of a false or hypocritical display either of poverty or good order, as may be thought most expedient, at the time of the visit. The Mission-woman drops in as a neighbour and a friend.

Mr. Furse has referred in heart-stirring language to a higher point—the blessing to the Mission-women themselves in having such an opening given them to a devoted life. I will only, therefore, state the fact that in many cases the duty has been accepted with thankfulness by widows, anxious to serve their Heavenly Master, as He was served of old by those women who followed His steps on earth. In others, those who have themselves home duties to perform, have nevertheless found or made time for executing the work of the mission.

Thirdly. The third principle, namely, abstinence from almsgiving, forms a special mark of distinction between the work conducted by the Parochial Mission Women's Society and that carried on by district visiting. I purposely abstain from contrasting any one branch of parochial work with another. District visiting may be all-important with reference to many objects of its own, but the Mission-woman's efforts would be at once paralysed if there were any mistake as to the object of her visits, any expectation of her assisting the poor to do that which we all, both rich and poor, are alike too ready to do, namely, shift their burthens upon the shoulders of others. She is to teach them how they can best *diminish* the burthen by removing all the self-imposed weights of sensuality or folly; how they can most aptly economise and apply such strength as they possess; and lastly, with the minister's help, how they can most cheerfully

bear that which must ever remain to be borne, when all is done, as being the duty assigned by no hard taskmaster, but by One who said of old by His prophet, "As thy days so shall thy strength be."

Having thus stated the *objects and principles* of the society, I will now shortly speak of its *constitution and general working*, and then of its present position.

The Lady-managers* (now five in number) have the general control of the undertaking and its funds. These funds are, however, carried to the Treasurer's account at the bank. To the Lady-managers applications are made by the Clergyman for the establishment of a Mission in his parish.

The Clergyman then appoints a Mission-woman and a Lady Superintendent, to be approved of by the Managers. It is not thought desirable, for many reasons which I need not enter into, that the clergyman's wife should act as lady superintendent. I have spoken of *one* Mission-woman—in some cases, if the funds will permit, two have been appointed, and of course any number may be so employed. A room is provided (if there be not already a school-room or some other suitable place) for weekly meetings of women who have been visited by the Mission-women, as they may be able to attend.

The Managers supply the Lady Superintendent with funds for the purchase of materials for clothing and bedding. These are purchased at wholesale prices, to be again distributed at cost price, to women willing to buy and work them up. The materials are kept at the Mission rooms, where the weekly meeting is held, and the poor women attend with the Mission-woman and work them up. They are not allowed to remove any materials to their own home till the whole cost price is paid; but, if they

* The Hon. Mrs. J. C. Talbot; The Lady Laura Palmer; The Hon. Cecily Stuart Wortley (Hon. Sec.); Lady Wood; Miss Laura Oldfield (Hon. Sec.) Any further information may be obtained from the *Treasurer*, The Hon. W. C. Spring Rice, 165, New Bond Street, W.

like, may pay for and remove them at once, instead of working on them at the meetings.

The Lady Superintendent presides at the meetings, and converses with and reads to the women whilst they are at work. The Clergyman attends before the close of the meeting, and the women are dismissed with prayer and his blessing. The reading by the Lady Superintendent is not necessarily of a religious character, but varies according to the wishes of the clergyman.

The Mission-woman in her visits collects the payments for clothing and bedding, and also for Bibles and Prayer books, which are provided at the cost price of the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge.

Accounts are made out weekly, according to very minute and accurate printed forms, of all payments made by the poor, and are transmitted regularly by the Lady Superintendent to the Lady-managers. The expense of a Mission is between £30 and £40. In some instances the whole or one-half has been supplied by the liberality of an individual. The Incumbent is expected to raise something towards the expense, though this is not made a condition of the establishment of the Mission when the parish is a very poor one.

These weekly returns also contain a return one of the number of visits paid daily by the Mission-women, and the numbers present at the weekly meetings, in order that the Managers may be able to form some judgment of the efficiency of the Mission. From 100 to 150 visits can be made in the week, though this number is sometimes exceeded. The Lady-managers from time to time, and without any previous notice, themselves visit the work meetings.

Once or twice a year a parochial tea party is given to the women who attend the weekly meetings, at which the Lady Superintendent and one or more of the Lady-managers attend.

A similar meeting takes place of the whole body of Mission-women.

There are occasional meetings also of the Lady-managers with the Lady Superintendents of all the Missions, and with such of the clergy as may be able to attend.

These various meetings tend materially to the cheerful and harmonious working of the whole scheme. It is, indeed, essential to its distinctive Christian character that the Mission-woman herself should be from time to time refreshed in spirit, and upheld in her work as a labour of love. The danger against which it is perhaps most necessary to guard her, is that of a too business-like routine discharge of secular duty. She may, herself, sink into a mere collector of pence, or maid-of-all-work, and cease to labour as a loving sister of mercy. The intercourse with the Lady Superintendent and the Clergyman should (as it is believed it does) counteract this tendency.

This is the simple machinery of the society, to which, however, has been made, since Mr. Furse's paper was read, one important addition, viz., a Committee of Reference, consisting of eight gentlemen, whose names would inspire confidence in any assembly of Churchmen. They are to meet annually for the purpose of examining and auditing all the accounts. At such meetings a statement of the whole working of the society is laid before them by the Lady-managers; and their suggestions and advice are asked as to any fresh regulations for giving steadiness and stability to the work.

The Lady-managers have also the privilege of convoking a meeting of this committee, if necessary, owing to any difficulty or embarrassment in the work. Two of the Committee of Reference act specially as auditors, and audit the whole accounts yearly. I cannot here insist too strongly on the advantage of this business element in the transactions of the society. Many useful works in the Church of Christ have been greatly hindered by carelessness in finance. We have the great example of St. Paul, who would not even send Titus alone with pecuniary aid to the Corinthians: "Considering this, that no one should blame

us in the abundance which is administered by us, providing for things, honest not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of man." 2 Cor. viii. 20.

It is intended to add, when required, trained Nurses to the Mission establishment. It has been found that instruction in nursing is deeply needed. The nurse will be a person trained under the superintendence of Miss Jones, at King's College Hospital, for a year, or six months at least, and her duty will be not merely to nurse but to teach the best method of nursing. She, of course, will be placed under the same control as the Mission-women.

Such is the constitution and working of the society, and now one word only on its present position.

When Mr. Furse read his paper last year, the society had established 28 Missions. In the report for June in the present year, they are mentioned by name, and amount to 46. They now amount to 51,* and fresh applications are continually received.

The missions are principally in the metropolis and its neighbourhood, but others have also been established at Plymouth,† Reading, Plumstead, and Chatham. The society has received the express sanction of his Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Bishop of London, and Bishop of Winchester, in whose dioceses principally the work is carried on. The Bishop of London himself preached the first sermon, when a collection was made in support of the institution, and has placed the "Parochial Mission Women" on the list of Christian works which he is desirous of carrying into effect by means of the large fund proposed to be raised in his diocese.

These details, few as they are, will show you that the work is appreciated by the clergy and is in full vigour. During the year

* Increased since this paper was read to 71. April, 1864.

† An Exeter Diocesan Branch now exists under the management of Lady Louisa Fortescue and Mrs. Pole Carew, in connexion with the Parent Society, which supports several Missions in Plymouth.

to which the last report extends, the 46 Missions received from the poor £1,217 12s. 1½d. in payment for clothing, bedding, Bibles, and Prayer-books. Of this sum, sometimes £1 a-week has been received in a single Mission in copper, 6s. or 8s. being in farthings; these payments increase as the poor rise in position. These figures alone serve to show that the work is appreciated by the poor, and in no case have these contributions caused any diminution of the deposits in provident funds, or other saving deposits, which have, in many instances, as might be expected, simultaneously increased.

I have copies of the last Report, which I shall be happy to distribute; and reference may be made to any of the clergy therein named, as to the working of the mission in his parish. Instances could be given, if time would allow it, which might interest those present, of the effects of the work as far as the present short experience has developed them. Mrs. Talbot's excellent book contains many such details. As an example of its diffusive, leavening character, I may mention the case of a poor woman who was lately heard saying to another at one of the weekly meetings, "I am sure I hope you will find this answer to you as it has to me: why, with the bits of furniture I have bought by degrees, I can now hire a room for 2s. 6d. a week instead of 4s. 6d. a week." The woman addressed had but just joined the meeting, and was in a most squalid state of poverty. Not unfrequently the women have required instruction in the first use of the needle. It has been even noticed that a wonderful change takes place not only in the dress but in the very countenance of the poor women attending the meetings. The sullen, depressed, all but desponding scowl, is sure to brighten by degrees into the cheerful look of a mind more elevated and at ease. It may be said women only are dealt with, but how does this affect the men? Those who know the influence on the working man's character for good or evil of the state of his house and household—of a tidy, quiet, well ordered, well

governed home, or of one that is the reverse, will not ask any question on that point.

The Congress has now before it a statement of the objects, constitution, and progress of the Parochial Mission Women's Society. I may add that the central board of Lady-managers is ready to receive subscriptions either for the general work or for specified missions, and ready also to afford assistance by its advice and experience to all who may be desirous of undertaking a similar work.

If the *principle* be in itself good, the *method* of working has the advantage of great simplicity. By fitting in to parochial work it is capable of adaptation to the whole of our population. Though conceived originally as infusing the leaven of Christianity into the dense masses of populous towns as yet scarcely touched by its influence, yet the help of the Mission-women in teaching habits of domestic order, cleanliness, and economy, would be everywhere of great service. There are many points also in which the Mission-women might be available to clergymen, especially to the younger clergy intrusted with the charge of populous rural districts, by keeping them well informed of the various habits and special wants, spiritual as well as temporal, of the poorer members of their flock.

Take a single illustration: the almost incredible amount of low and debasing superstitions imbedded in the minds of the rural population as firmly as they were in the middle ages. Some lamentable instances of this have lately occurred; such as the drowning, not a month ago, in Essex, of a wretched deaf and dumb foreigner, eighty-six years of age, as a wizard, in the presence of seventy or eighty villagers, none of whom lifted arm or even voice to save him.

But as the institution of Parochial Mission-women *fits in* to the existing working of our parishes, so, also, it *supersedes nothing*. It fills *permanently* a gap, which has hitherto been only bridged over, it may be, from time to time, on pressing emergency, in

this or that parish, by the personal benevolence of individuals possessing a rare capacity for attracting sympathy and confidence.

I cannot, indeed, be supposed to overlook the remarkable manner in which the tie of Christian brotherhood must have been strengthened, during the course of the last eventful year in the great manufacturing districts, in the very heart of which we are assembled. I see around me those whose ready help and brotherly and sisterly compassion must have won their way to the hearts of the noble suffering classes of Lancashire. Those helpers, too, must have been greatly touched, yes, and must have been themselves ennobled and purified, by witnessing the manner in which a trial unexampled in our time, if not in history, has been borne; with what meek and manly resignation to the Divine will.

But I shall have failed to convey adequately the scope of the Mission-woman's work, if I have not made it appear that her labour of love is not confined, nor even principally directed, to ministrations among the honest, hard-working, industrious classes. Its object is rather to stir up the indolent and apathetic, to open the eyes of the improvident, to check the downward path of the sensual, to cheer the desponding, by pointing out to them not merely the Mission-woman's own example, but the example of others amongst whom she has laboured, and thus convincing all that in this life, and as regards things temporal, there is no impassable gulph between happiness and misery. Surely this will lighten the labour of him, who, armed with a higher commission, shall be called upon to warn them of the awful moment when evil and misery will be eternally separated from goodness and bliss, and to exhort them, even at the eleventh hour, to become fellow-labourers in his Master's vineyard.

I believe the work has commended itself to our Bishops, our Clergy, and to the lay-supporters of the society, no less than to our poorer brethren, by its simplicity and its appropriateness. In a beautiful sermon of one who has been lately added to the

distinguished Clergy of the North, I find a passage particularly applicable to this labour of love:—"The condition of success in heavenly things is still, as it has ever been, not ingenuity, but devotion; not hurry, but patience; not self-confidence or presumption, but earnest prayer and invincible faith."—*Vaughan's Lessons of Life and Godliness, Sermon XIII.*



